



Statement of

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I'd like to thank you, Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen and Ranking Member Deutch, for asking me to appear on behalf of the Congressional Research Service on this important topic. I will summarize my remarks and ask that my full statement be submitted for the record.

Overview

The United States has been a major actor in the security of the Persian Gulf region since the early 1970s, and has served as a guarantor of Gulf security for over thirty years. It was during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, which spilled over to the Gulf states themselves, that the Gulf states began to turn to the United States to protect them from the two large Gulf powers Iran and, somewhat later, Iraq. It was in the early stages of that war that the six Arab monarchy states of the Gulf – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and the Sultanate of Oman – formed the “Gulf Cooperation Council,” or GCC. That 1981 alliance, which has security, economic, and political components, remains intact today despite numerous experts’ predictions over the years that it would dissolve.

The security of the GCC countries is considered by many experts to be a vital U.S. interest. That is not only because the United States still imports more than 15% of its oil from the GCC states but also because about one-third of internationally-traded oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz. Additionally, Iran has shown its ability to support armed factions throughout the Middle East that oppose a multiplicity of U.S. allies and interests, and containing a potential threat from Iran requires a substantial degree of consistent cooperation from the GCC states.

- During the Iran-Iraq war, U.S. forces protected international shipping in the Gulf from the so-called “tanker war” between Iran and Iraq, and from Iran’s attempts to disrupt international shipping through the firing of missiles and the laying of mines.
- In 1991, U.S. forces led a large coalition, including some Arab states, to end the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait by the forces of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. After that war, four of the GCC states formalized defense relations with the United States through bilateral defense agreements, and a fifth, Oman, renewed its pre-existing cooperation arrangements with the United States. Pre-existing U.S.-Saudi cooperation, although not enshrined in a formal overarching pact, was expanded as well.
- During the 1990s, all of the GCC states hosted U.S. and coalition forces that sought to contain Saddam Hussein, who remained in power despite Iraq’s expulsion from Kuwait.
- In 1993, the Clinton Administration articulated a policy of “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq, and the policy depended heavily on U.S. defense cooperation with the GCC states.
- In 2003, the GCC states, particularly Kuwait, hosted the U.S. force that invaded Iraq and overthrew Saddam Hussein’s regime.

- With Iraq's government no longer a significant threat to its neighbors, U.S.-GCC defense cooperation has focused on containing Iranian power and on applying economic and political pressure, backed up by the threat of force, to compel Iran to limit its nuclear program to aspects that have exclusively civilian purposes.
- Most recently, U.S.-GCC cooperation has also focused on trying to resolve regional conflicts on terms that benefit U.S. and GCC interests and on countering the threat from terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and Al Qaeda.

The Gulf States and Iran

To a substantial degree, all of the GCC leaders have publicly identified Iran as a potential threat. However, there are differences among the GCC states - and between some of the GCC states and the United States - over how best to deal with that threat. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have been consistently critical of Iran in public and have supported all U.S. efforts to exert economic and military pressure on Iran. All three have openly accused Iran of meddling in their internal affairs. Bahraini leaders have consistently accused Iran of stoking Shiite opposition since February 2011. The State Department report on international terrorism for 2013 stated that Iran has attempted to supply weapons to Shiite oppositionists there,¹ but the same report for 2014, released June 19, 2015, did not repeat that assertion.² Saudi Arabia has accused Iran of supporting Shiite opposition activists in the eastern provinces. The UAE has a specific territorial dispute with Iran over three islands in the Gulf - Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb island, dating to the seizure of the islands by the Shah's regime in 1971. The UAE and Iran subsequently agreed to share control of Abu Musa, but Iran expelled UAE security personnel from Abu Musa in 1992 and subsequently emplaced some defense equipment on it. Still, even those GCC states most critical of Iran maintain full diplomatic and normal trade relations with Iran. At the same time these states have enforced U.S. sanctions against Iran; in May 2015, Bahrain's Central Bank seized Future Bank, an Iranian-owned bank that has been sanctioned by the United States.³

The Sultanate of Oman, led by the ailing Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, pursues a somewhat different course than the other GCC states. Sultan Qaboos asserts that consistent engagement with Iran is the preferred strategy for limiting the potential Iranian threat; he has been the only Gulf leader to exchange regular leadership-level visits with Iran. In March 2014, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Oman, the only GCC state he has visited since taking office in August 2013. Oman brokered U.S.-Iran talks in 2013 that apparently facilitated the reaching of a November 2013 interim nuclear deal between Iran and the United States and five other major powers ("P5+1": United States, Russia, China, France, Britain, and Germany).⁴ Oman has subsequently hosted P5+1 - Iran nuclear negotiations and its banks serve as a

¹ For text of the report for 2013, see: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2013/224826.htm>

² For text of the report for 2014, see: <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/index.htm>

³ http://www.cbb.gov.bh/page.php?p=cbb_places_future_bank_and_iran_insurance_company_into_administration

⁴ Paul Richter. "Oman Sultan's Visit Reportedly a Mediation Bid Between Iran and U.S." *Los Angeles Times*, August 30, 2013; Shashank Bengali. "U.S.-Iran Thaw Began with Months of Secret Meetings." *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2013.

financial channel for the permitted transfer of hard currency oil sales proceeds to Iran under a 2013 P5+1-Iran interim nuclear agreement.⁵

Two of the other GCC states, Kuwait and Qatar, take intermediate positions. Both have joined GCC statements critical of Iran, but both maintain more regular high-level diplomatic engagement with Tehran than do Saudi Arabia, UAE, or Bahrain. Kuwait's Emir, Shaykh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah, visited Iran in June 2014, meeting not only with President Hassan Rouhani but also with the Supreme Leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i. The powerful speaker of Iran's Majles (parliament), Ali Larijani, visited Qatar in March 2015, and was allowed to meet with Hamas leaders who are in exile there.

The GCC states have all expressed concern about how a finalized P5+1-Iran nuclear agreement, still under negotiation, might affect the region. The GCC leaders assert that broad relief from sanctions under such an agreement would provide Iran with more resources and opportunities for assisting regional factions and governments that the GCC states oppose, such as that of President Bashar Al Asad of Syria, "Houthi" rebels in Yemen, Shiite militia forces in Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah.⁶ The GCC leaders are also apparently concerned that a nuclear deal could lead to a broader improvement in U.S.-Iran relations that gives Iranian views on the region increased weight; and that the United States could come to view the Gulf region as secure and reduce its personnel and equipment deployed in the GCC countries.⁷ Those who support these arguments assert that Iran's foreign policy is likely to become even more challenging for the GCC in the event of a nuclear deal. As examples:

- Sanctions relief could enable Iran to modernize its armed forces, potentially to the point where it has increased ability to move ground forces across waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz—and thereby further intimidate the GCC states.
- Iran could decide to increase its assistance to hardline opposition factions in Bahrain, which have thus far made little headway in challenging the government's control of the country.⁸

On the other hand, it is possible that a nuclear deal could benefit Gulf security. A nuclear agreement would give Iran an incentive to avoid actions that could provoke calls for the re-imposition or addition of international sanctions.⁹ President Obama has argued that Iran has a strong national interest in avoiding re-imposition of sanctions or of military action as a potential consequence of pursuing "expansionist ambitions."¹⁰ Treasury Secretary Jacob Lew has argued that Iran will likely use additional financial resources to rebuild its civilian economy, which has shrunk since 2012 as a consequence of international sanctions. And, the GCC states that all conduct extensive commerce with Iran, particularly the UAE, could benefit economically if Iran's economy resumes growth. A nuclear agreement also could strengthen Iranian moderates who seek to improve Iran's international reputation and potentially lead to increased U.S.-Iranian cooperation on some regional issues. Some examples of possible positive Iranian foreign policy outcomes—and other possible shifts—that have been identified in the event that a nuclear deal is finalized include:

⁵ Assistant Secretary of State for Legislative Affairs Julia Frifeld. Letter to Senator Bob Corker, Chairman Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. June 17, 2015. Enclosure to letter: Department of State. Determination and Certification pursuant to the National Defense Authorization Act of FY2012. Undated.

⁶ "Iran's Economy could Grow by 2 percent if Sanctions are Lifted," *Middle East Eye*, May 25, 2015.

⁷ "Public Saudi Welcome for Iran Nuclear Deal Masks Private Unease," *Reuters*, April 3, 2015.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ "Saudis Make Own Moves as U.S. and Iran Talk," *New York Times*, March 31, 2015.

¹⁰ "President Obama Interview with Jeffrey Goldberg," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2015.

- Depending on the Saudi perception of a post-nuclear agreement threat from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran could potentially cooperate on a political solution in Yemen.
- Iran and the United Arab Emirates, a key Gulf Arab state, might resolve their territorial dispute over Abu Musa and the two Tunb islands in the Persian Gulf.
- Iran could integrate more closely into regional energy solutions, for example by finalizing agreements, long under discussion, to build natural gas pipeline linkages with Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain.

Camp David Summit: U.S. Efforts to Reassure the Gulf States

The Administration has sought to reassure the GCC leaders that the United States remains committed to Gulf security. The Administration has argued that a nuclear deal with Iran would benefit Gulf security by ensuring that, at least for the duration of the agreement, Iran could not easily produce a nuclear weapon. In his announcement of the April 2, 2015, framework nuclear accord with Iran, President Obama invited the leaders of the six Arab countries that make up the GCC to meet at Camp David “to discuss how we can further strengthen our security cooperation, while resolving the multiple conflicts that have caused so much hardship and instability throughout the Middle East.”¹¹ In advance of the May 13-14, 2015, summit, the GCC leaders released a statement expressing hope that the framework agreement would “pave the way for a comprehensive final agreement,” provided that such a final agreement meets several general criteria. The joint statement also expressed “aspirations” that “normal relations with Iran” could be “re-established based on mutual respect of the principles of good neighborliness and respect for the sovereignty of states.”¹²

Expectations for the summit were dampened by the fact that only two of the six GCC leaders attended – Emir Sabah of Kuwait and Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar. However, those countries whose top leaders did not attend still sent high-level decision makers, such as Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Nayef Al Saud. The UAE’s de-facto leader Shaykh Mohammad bin Zayid Al Nuhayyan attended as well, substituting for the ailing UAE President Khalifa bin Zayid al-Nuhayyan. The joint statement issued after the summit announced a new U.S.-GCC strategic partnership and reiterated that it is U.S. policy to use all elements of U.S. national power to secure core U.S. interests in the Gulf and to deter and confront external aggression “against our allies and partners....” An annex to the joint statement says that the United States will increase security cooperation with the GCC states in the following ways: (1) facilitating U.S. arms transfers to the GCC states; (2) increasing U.S.-GCC cooperation on maritime security, cybersecurity, and counterterrorism; (3) organizing additional large-scale joint military exercises and U.S. training; and (4) stating a renewed commitment to a concept of a Gulf-wide ballistic missile defense capability, which the United States has sought to promote in recent years.¹³ The statement also highlighted joint efforts to counter Iran’s “destabilizing activities” in the region as well as a commitment to defeating the Islamic State and to countering violent extremism more broadly.

¹¹ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Statement by the President on the Framework to Prevent Iran from Obtaining a Nuclear Weapon, April 2, 2015.

¹² “GCC Consultative Meeting issues Final Communiqué,” *Emirates News Agency*, May 5, 2015.

¹³ The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, Annex to U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement, May 14, 2015.

Some observers of Gulf politics suggested that GCC leaders were relatively satisfied with the outcome of the meeting.¹⁴ Gulf diplomats indicate that working groups on the four stipulated issue areas have been established in the foreign and defense ministries of the GCC states, and that U.S.-GCC meetings on these issues are becoming more systematic, regular, and structured.¹⁵

Foundations of U.S. - GCC Military Cooperation

A key to the U.S.-GCC relationship is defense cooperation and the maintenance of a large U.S. military presence in the Gulf. U.S. officials assert that, as of 2015, there are about 35,000 U.S. forces in the Gulf region. Most of them are stationed at various Gulf state facilities to which the United States has access, in accordance with Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCAs) and related agreements between the United States and each GCC country. Some of the U.S. force is aboard a U.S. aircraft carrier task force that is in the Gulf region virtually continuously. The DCAs reportedly stipulate modalities of joint cooperation, provide for the United States to preposition substantial military equipment, and provide U.S. access to Gulf state military facilities.¹⁶

The Defense Department has stated that continued major U.S. arms sales to the GCC countries are necessary to improve their air and naval capabilities and their interoperability with U.S. forces, as well as to improve border and maritime security. The United States has continued to agree to major sales to virtually all of the GCC states, including such equipment as combat aircraft, precision-guided munitions, Littoral Combat Ships, radar systems, and communications gear. According to the Defense Security Assistance Agency of the Department of Defense, the United States has proposed over \$90 billion in arms sales to the largest GCC arms buyer, Saudi Arabia, since 2010.¹⁷ Two of the GCC countries, Kuwait and Bahrain, have been named as “Major Non-NATO Allies” (MNNA), which qualify countries so designated to purchase sophisticated U.S. arms normally sold only to U.S. NATO allies. However, some arms sales to Bahrain have been withheld because of the government’s use of force to suppress Shiite unrest there. Most of the GCC countries are wealthy states easily able to purchase weaponry using national funds. The two least wealthy GCC states, Bahrain and Oman, receive small amounts of U.S. military and counter-terrorism/border security assistance - Foreign Military Financing (FMF) and Non-Proliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining and Related (NADR) funds.

In addition, even though the GCC states are large buyers of U.S. and other military equipment, commentators often question the level of training and expertise of the Gulf military forces. Some of the GCC states rely heavily on foreign troops in their ranks, such as Pakistani troops serving under contract. The UAE has reportedly contracted with private security firms to develop certain elements of a force that can be used for internal security and other purposes.

U.S.-GCC defense cooperation has the following outlines:¹⁸

¹⁴ Author conversations with observers from the GCC region. May-June 2015.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The texts of the DCAs and related agreements are classified, but general information on the provisions of the agreements has been provided in some open sources, including <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/pub185.pdf>.

¹⁷ See: CRS Report RL33533: Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations, by Christopher M. Blanchard.

¹⁸ The U.S. deployments in the Gulf are discussed in greater detail in CRS reports on the individual GCC states. Information in this section is derived from author visits to the GCC states since 1993 and conversations with U.S. and Gulf state diplomats. See

- *Saudi Arabia.* The United States does not have a DCA with Saudi Arabia. Nonetheless, a few hundred U.S. military personnel are in Saudi Arabia training its military, the Saudi Arabia National Guard (SANG), and Ministry of Interior forces. The Saudi armed forces have over 225,000 active duty personnel, with about 600 tanks, of which 200 are U.S.-made M1A2 “Abrams” tanks. Saudi Arabia is a very large buyer of U.S. weaponry, and the Saudi Air Force relies heavily on the U.S.-made F-15.
- *Kuwait.* The United States has had a DCA with Kuwait since 1991, and about 13,000 U.S. Army personnel are stationed there, in part providing the United States a ground combat capability. U.S. forces operate out of such facilities as Camp Arifjan, south of Kuwait City, where the United States prepositions ground armor including tanks. U.S. forces train at Camp Buehring, about 50 miles west of the capital, and operate in other facilities such as Shaykh Jabir Air Base and Shaykh Ali al-Salem Air Base. Kuwait has a small force of over 15,000 active military personnel. It relies almost exclusively on U.S. equipment, including the M1A2 Abrams tank and the F/A-18 “Hornet” combat aircraft.
- *Qatar.* The United States has had a DCA with Qatar since 1992 and signed an updated version in December 2013. About 5,000 U.S. forces, mostly Air Force, are in Qatar, manning the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which has responsibility for the Middle East and Central Asia; a Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) that oversees U.S. combat aircraft missions in the region; the large Al Udeid Air Base, and the *As Saliyah* army prepositioning site where U.S. tanks are prepositioned. Qatar’s armed force is small with less than 12,000 active military personnel. Qatar has historically relied on French military equipment, fielding AMX-30 tanks and Mirage combat aircraft. In May 2015, during a visit to the Gulf by French President Francois Hollande, Qatar agreed to buy 24 French-made Rafale fighter jets worth about \$7 billion.¹⁹ However, as discussed below, Qatar has ordered U.S.-made sophisticated missile defense systems.
- *UAE.* The United States has had a DCA with UAE since 1994. About 5,000 U.S. forces, mostly Air Force and Navy, are stationed in UAE, operating surveillance and refueling aircraft from Al Dhafra Air Base, and servicing U.S. Navy and contract ships which dock at the large commercial port of Jebel Ali. The UAE armed forces include about 63,000 active duty personnel. Its ground forces use primarily French tanks such as the Leclerc purchased in the 1990s and the AMX-30, but the core of its Air Force is the F-16. The UAE has stated that it wants to buy the F-35 “Joint Strike Fighter,” but U.S. officials have stated that the system will not be approved for sale to the GCC for at least several years.²⁰ That policy appears to be based at least in part on the U.S. stated commitment to maintain Israel’s “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME) over any of its Arab neighbors, even though the GCC and Israel are aligned on many issues, particularly Iran.

also: International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The Military Balance, 2015.”

¹⁹ France and Qatar Seal \$7 Billion Rafale Fighter Jet Deal. Reuters, April 30, 2015.

²⁰ “No Near Term F-35 Sales in Gulf Region: Pentagon.” Reuters, February 22, 2015.
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/22/us-defence-gulf-f-idUSKBN0LQ07Q20150222>

- *Bahrain.* The United States has had a DCA with Bahrain since 1991. About 6,000 U.S. personnel, mostly Navy, operate out of the large Naval Support Activity facility that houses the U.S. command structure for all U.S. naval operations in the Gulf. U.S. Air Force personnel also access Shaykh Isa Air Base. Bahrain has the smallest military in the Gulf, with only about 8,000 active personnel, but it has internal security forces under the Ministry of Interior with about 11,000 personnel. The United States has given Bahrain older model U.S. M60A3 tanks and a frigate as “excess defense articles,” and the country has bought U.S.-made F-16s with national funds.
- *Oman.* The United States has had a “facilities access agreement” with Oman since April 1980. Under the agreement, U.S. forces, mostly Air Force, have access to Omani air bases such as those at Seeb, Masirah Island, Thumrait, and Musnanah. A few hundred U.S. forces serve at these facilities. Oman’s armed forces have about 43,000 military personnel that have historically relied on British-made military equipment. The United States has provided some M60A3 tanks as excess defense articles, and Oman has bought F-16s using national funds.

Promoting Greater GCC Defense Integration

The United States has consistently sought to promote defense cooperation among the GCC states. The GCC has had a small Saudi-based combined force, called Peninsula Shield, since the mid-1980s, but it is generally more a reserve force than a standing military. In the past few years, the GCC leaders have formally supported suggestions by Saudi Arabia to form a unified GCC military command structure, but similar proposals have been discussed within the GCC for at least two decades with minimal implementation to date. The United States has sought to promote that concept by attempting to deal with the GCC countries as a bloc, rather than individually, but suspicions and grievances among the GCC states has precluded progress on that concept to date.

A cornerstone of the U.S. effort to promote greater GCC defense cooperation is an initiative to develop a coordinated Gulf state missile defense capability. Then Secretary of Defense Hagel emphasized the joint missile defense vision during his December 2013 and May 2014 visits to the Gulf, including stating that the United States prefers to sell related equipment to the GCC as a bloc, rather than individually. As part of this effort, there have been several recent missile defense sales including PAC-3 sales to UAE and Kuwait and the advanced “THAAD” (Theater High Altitude Area Defense system) to UAE and Qatar. In September 2012, it was reported that the United States was putting in place an early-warning missile defense radar in Qatar that, when combined with radars in Israel and Turkey, would provide a wide range of coverage against Iran’s missile forces.²¹

Increased GCC Foreign Policy Assertiveness

U.S. efforts to strengthen the defense capabilities of the GCC states might also have contributed to the increased foreign policy assertiveness of several of the GCC countries, particularly UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. Some of the GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE, appear to want to take

²¹ David Sanger and Eric Schmitt, “To Calm Israel, U.S. Offers Ways to Restrain Iran,” *New York Times*, September 3, 2012.

stronger action against certain Islamist militant movements and Iranian allies and proxies than that advocated by the United States. Either reluctant or unable to persuade the United States to take actions some of the GCC states advocate, several of the GCC countries are utilizing their capability to act militarily without the United States. The GCC states also have substantial wealth with which to promote their interests through means other than direct military action, including funding armed factions in the region. The net effect is that some of the GCC states have been taking some military actions that are not necessarily coordinated with the United States, or that go beyond U.S. policy in the region. There have also been splits among some of the GCC countries as they have sought to act in the region. Examples include:

- *Libya.* Qatar and UAE both strongly supported U.S. policy in 2011 by playing significant roles in support of operations to support rebels that overthrew then-leader Muammar al-Qadhafi in 2011. Subsequently, Qatar and the UAE reportedly supplied rival governments, with Qatar backing the Tripoli-based Libya Dawn coalition, and the UAE supporting the Operation Dignity faction based in the eastern city of Tobruk. Press reports suggest that President Obama encouraged leaders from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates to settle their differences concerning the ongoing civil conflict and political dispute in Libya.²² According to a U.S. National Security Committee spokesperson, “All leaders at Camp David decided to move in concert to convince all Libyan parties to accept an inclusive power-sharing agreement based on proposals put forward by the UN and to focus on countering the growing terrorist presence in the country. There was a shared recognition that there is no military solution to the conflict, and that it can only be resolved through political and peaceful means.”²³ In 2014, in concert with Egypt, the UAE undertook an airstrike against a militant Islamist faction in Libya.²⁴ The UAE reportedly did not inform the United States before undertaking the strike, and U.S. officials reportedly indicated after the strike that they viewed outside military action in Libya as counterproductive to efforts to promote a political settlement there.²⁵
- *The Islamic State.* Several GCC countries are contributing military forces in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, specifically through participation in military strike operations against Islamic State targets in Syria. However, two sets of strategic differences may be limiting further U.S.-GCC cooperation on efforts in Iraq and Syria. First, relations between Iraq’s government and the Sunni Arab Gulf states have been consistently strained in the post-Saddam Hussein period, in part because Iraq’s government has been dominated by Shiite factions politically close to Iran. Arab Gulf leaders remain critical of Iran’s role in Iraq and may remain reluctant to offer support via Iraq’s central government or prefer to work directly with Sunni Arab or Kurdish leaders. Military strikes by Gulf forces in Iraq could prove controversial among GCC citizens to the extent that they may be seen as empowering Shiite elements in Iraq. In Syria, some GCC leaders’ views on the relative priority of combatting the Islamic State and other extremist groups versus removing the Asad government may continue to place limits on the willingness of GCC partners to support U.S. initiatives.

²² Akbar Shahid Ahmed, “Obama Brokered A Secret Deal Between 2 Arab States That Could Help End Libya's Civil War,” *Huffington Post*, June 17, 2015.

²³ Alistair Baskey quoted in Ahmed, Obama Brokered....” June 17, 2015.

²⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/world/africa/egypt-and-united-arab-emirates-said-to-have-secretly-carried-out-libya-airstrikes.html?_r=0

²⁵ Ibid.

- *Syria.* Even though the GCC countries have supported U.S. policy against the Islamic State in Syria, some of the GCC countries are taking actions beyond that being taken in that country by the United States against President Bashar al Asad. The United States and the GCC countries have called for Asad's removal, but the United States has articulated the conflict against the Islamic State forces there as a higher priority at this time than attempting to force Asad from power. The GCC states assert that Asad is a key instrument of Iranian influence in the region and strongly oppose his military efforts to suppress rebellion by much of Syria's majority Sunni population. Several of the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, have apparently taken significant steps to try to achieve that result. The two countries reportedly have transferred significant funds and quantities of arms to separate and sometimes competing armed rebel groups in Syria. More recently, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other regional rebel supporters have increased their coordination, and are cooperating with U.S. programs whose stated goal is to support forces in Syria against the Islamic State organization there. Wealthy private individuals in some of the GCC states, including Kuwait, whose government has apparently not become involved militarily in Syria, reportedly have raised monies for extremist Islamist rebel factions in Syria. U.S. officials have called on the GCC countries to shut down such private funding channels.
- *Yemen.* With respect to the internal conflict in Yemen between the Zaydi Shiite "Houthi" rebellion and the government of Abdu Rabbo Masour Hadi, Saudi Arabia has led a military intervention that the United States was apparently reluctant to support. The United States is providing logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition and deploying naval ships to deter Iran from arming the Houthi forces. U.S. officials deemed it important to publicly support the Saudi military operations against the Houthis, but as the operation has continued over time, Yemen has become increasingly unstable, creating opportunities for extremists such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State to increase their influence. Moreover, the conflict has enflamed Saudi-Iranian tensions, leading to confrontational statements between respective Saudi and Iranian government officials as well as near maritime clashes between Saudi and Iranian vessels in the Gulf of Aden.²⁶
- *Egypt.* Some of the GCC states were critical of the U.S. backing for the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak as the 2011 popular uprising in Egypt gained strength. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, in particular, opposed the election of a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammad Morsi, as President in July 2012. The two supported the Egyptian military's ouster of Morsi in July 2013 and the subsequent election as president of General Abdel Fatah El-Sisi. Within weeks of Morsi's ouster, Saudi Arabia assembled a \$12 billion GCC aid package to financially stabilize the military-led government in Cairo. Since then, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait have given billions more. The aid to Sisi contrasted with U.S. policy, which held up arms deliveries until March 2015 because of the military takeover.

Human Rights in the U.S.-GCC Relationship

Some might argue that U.S. reliance on strategic cooperation with the Gulf states has caused it to mute criticism of human rights abuses in the GCC countries. Over the past several years, several of the GCC leaders, including Amir Tamim of Qatar, Amir Sabah of Kuwait, and acting UAE leader Mohammad bin

²⁶ For detailed information on the current situation in Yemen, see CRS Report R43960. Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention, by Jeremy M. Sharp.

Zayid al Nuhayyan have held talks in Washington, D.C. with President Obama. The communiques issued after all these meetings discussed regional issues such as the Iran nuclear deal, the Islamic State, and the situation in Syria; there was no mention of discussion of human rights issues in any of these announcements.²⁷

On the other hand, U.S. documents on human rights, such as the annual U.S. State Department report on human rights conditions in countries around the world, describe serious human rights problems in each of the GCC countries and notes the denial of basic political rights in each, especially the right of citizens to change their government. All of the GCC states are led by hereditary monarchies, with varying degrees of popular input into governance. All GCC leaders appoint cabinets in their respective states, and many of the cabinet positions are held by members of the ruling family. All the states have established consultative assemblies that can review government draft legislation, but only that of Kuwait is fully elected by the population. None of these bodies, even the Kuwait National Assembly, has the powers of a Western legislature. Consultative assemblies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar are fully appointed, and bi-cameral assemblies in Bahrain and Oman have elected lower houses and appointed upper houses. Qatar announced plans to hold elections for its consultative body several years ago, but elections have not been held, to date. The UAE's consultative assembly, which includes representative of all seven of the federation's emirates, is partly elected and partly appointed. These bodies have deliberated their government's policies on regional issues, but generally have not been major factors in shaping foreign policy. Over the past several decades, U.S. officials have urged the GCC countries to devolve additional powers to these consultative bodies, but have not made U.S. relations contingent on progress.

A trend that has attracted U.S. criticism of several of the GCC states by U.S. and international human rights groups is the increasing number of prosecutions of opponents who use newspapers and social media to criticize the government and mobilize demonstrations. Several of the GCC states have adopted new laws providing for jail terms for offenses usually termed "insulting the leadership." The adoption of counterterrorism legislation identifying certain acts and groups as treasonous has provided a wider basis for prosecutions of bloggers, opposition activists using social media, and other domestic critics of the GCC governments. U.S. and outside human rights reports also routinely cite all of the GCC states for failing to take sufficient action to stop human trafficking, for limitations on women's rights, and for abuses against the large foreign worker populations in all of the GCC states.²⁸

There has been an expectation that generational leadership change in the GCC states might lead to improvement in their human rights practices. Amir Tamim of Qatar took power in 2013, and the Saudi leadership is in the process of generational change from the sons of the founder of the Kingdom, to his grandsons. Mohammad bin Zayid al Nuhayyan, the third son of UAE founder Shaykh Zayid bin Sultan al Nuhayyan, is likely at some point formally to replace his infirmed elder brother, UAE President Shaykh Khalifa bin Zayid al Nuhayyan.

Bahrain's human rights practices have attracted the most U.S. and international attention in recent years. Bahrain is the only GCC state with a majority Shiite population, but it is ruled by the Sunni Al Khalifa family. It is the only GCC state that faced sustained unrest related to the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world. Kuwait and Oman faced some unrest related to the "Arab Spring," but demonstrations waned as

²⁷ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/13/remarks-president-obama-and-amir-sabah-al-sabah-kuwait-after-bilateral-m>

²⁸ The most recent State Department country reports on human rights, for 2014, can be found at: [\[http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper\]](http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper)

the governments were able to use government largesse, some compromise, and some repression against its opposition.

The Bahrain uprising that began on February 14, 2011, has not achieved the goals of Shiite oppositionists to establish a constitutional monarchy. Public unrest has diminished since 2012, but occasional large demonstrations, opposition boycotts of elections, and continued arrests of dissidents counter government assertions that Bahrain has returned to normal. The government has enacted some reforms, but these have not substantially diluted its authority or satisfied the opposition. The government's use of repression to counter the unrest has presented a policy dilemma for the Obama Administration because of Bahrain's role as a pivotal strategic ally. The Administration has held up some sales to Bahrain of arms, particularly those that could be used for internal security purposes, and has somewhat reduced Bahrain's Foreign Military Financing (FMF) assistance. However, on June 30, 2015, the Administration announced it would proceed with the sale of Humvees, small arms, and other equipment to Bahrain – a sale that was put on hold in October 2011 because of the government's use of force against protesters. Sales to Bahrain's Interior Ministry remain suspended.

Table 1. Military Assets of the Gulf Cooperation Council Member States

	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	UAE
Total Manpower	8,200+	15,500+	42,600+	11,800	227,000+	63,000
ARMY and NATIONAL GUARD						
Personnel	6,000	11,000	25,000	8,500	175,000	44,400
Main Battle Tanks	180	293	154	39	600	467
AIFV/APC	225	789	206	230	3,011	1,957
Artillery	151	218	233	91+	771	579+
Attack Helicopters	-	-	-	-	15	-
SAMs	91	136+	48	75	1,805	N/A
NAVY						
Personnel	700	2,000	4,200	1,800	13,500	2,500
Destroyers /Frigates	1	-	3	-	7	-
Submarines	-	-	2	-	-	10
Patrol/Coastal Combatants	64	52	46	23	83	141
Amphibious Landing Craft	1	4	-	-	8	-
AIR FORCE						
Personnel (Air Defense)	1,500	2,500	5,000	1,500	20,000 (16,000)	4,500
Fighter Aircraft	33	39	15	12	261	138 (18 JAC)
Attack Helicopters	28	16	-	8	-	37 (JAC)
MISSILE DEFENSE						
Patriot PAC-2	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes
Patriot PAC-3	Yes	Yes	-	Yes	Yes	Yes
THAAD	-	-	-	Ordered	-	Ordered

Source: Compiled by Hector Piña, Research Assistant, and Susan Chessier, Information Research Specialist, using *The Military Balance*, 2015, Vol. 115, current as of February 10, 2015, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Notes: AIFV= Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle, APC= Armored Personnel Carrier, SAM= Surface-to-Air Missile, THAAD= Terminal High Altitude Area Defense